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ABSTRACT

The Continental Project is a school-to-work transition program for students with disabilities. The 6-year old program, which is located at a country club and golf course, serves more than 20 students per year and has successfully transitioned 45 young adults with moderate to severe handicaps into the workforce. The program is a cooperative effort of the Continental Country Club, Flagstaff Public Schools, Flagstaff Chamber of Commerce Education Committee, and Mountain Linen Company. Students receive on-the-job training in paid positions. The program's paid work experiences integrate training in work skills, social competence, and life skills. The program also includes job coaches who provide continued support for students once they have been placed in competitive employment and a van to transport students to the job site. Participating students rotate through various assignments, including food and beverage preparation, handling reservations, assembling mailings of newsletters, landscaping, general maintenance, working in the laundry area, and repairing linens. Students work at their job site 4 hours each morning and spend their afternoons in a classroom on the clubhouse's second floor. Students stay in the program until they acquire the skills needed to succeed in competitive employment or until they turn 22. The program serves a mix of Native American, Mexican American, White, and African American students. (Contains 10 references.) (MN)

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The Continental Project:

A model program for school to work transition for students with disabilities

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The Continental Project:

A school to work transition for students with disabilities

Abstract: *The Continental Project is a school-to-work transition for students with disabilities. The six year old program, based at a country club and golf course, serves 20+ students each year and has successfully transitioned 45 young adults with moderate to severe handicaps into the work force. The students are provided an integrated program of work skills, social competence and life skills. This successful program is not only impacting the lives of the students, staff, and families of participants, but has altered the perception of the community about the work ethic and abilities of people with disabilities. The program is set to expand into the work community at large.*

Introduction

For many years students with disabilities have been excluded from curriculum, service deliver, and post secondary opportunities which would prepare them for integration into the workplace and the community (National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990; U.S. Department of Labor, 1991; William T. Grant Foundation, 1988). Several studies document the difficulties students with disabilities have encountered in their post school life, such as difficulties with finding and then keeping a job, poor integration into the community, lack of a social network, and lack of independence (Benz, & Halpern,1993; Hamilton & Hamilton, 1994; Hasazi, Gordon & Roe, 1985; Levine & Edgar, 1995). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 was established, in part, so that transition services would be included in student Individual Education Plans (IEP's). The transition services help students with disabilities move into post-school activities such as post secondary education, vocational training, and integrated employment (National Transition Network. (1994, Summer).

The 1997 changes to IDEA underscored the importance of high school based vocational preparation programs for students with developmental challenges. Increased work opportunities in service occupations such as the hotel and restaurant industries, child care, technology, inventory management, and clerical support (Brown, Halpern, Hasazi & Wehman,1987) could fit within

that need, if addressed as part of a transition program.

Students with disabilities can assume these positions when school programs are designed to properly train students and expose them to the various work environments. The special education classroom can expand beyond the physical structure of the traditional school building, and special education staff can establish new roles and new skills to enhance student preparation for the workplace through school and industry partnerships. (DeStafano & Wermuth, 1992).

Continental Project

One program that is successfully preparing students with disabilities for integrated employment is the Continental Project in Flagstaff, Arizona. The Continental Project is an on-the-job training program paired with the hospitality industry that provides training for high school students with severe disabilities. The program provides the opportunity to learn marketable job skills and work habits tailored to provide successful integration into the workplace. The project began in August, 1992, and is a cooperative effort of the Continental Country Club, the Flagstaff Public Schools, the Flagstaff Chamber of Commerce Education Committee, and Mountain Linen Company.

The project receives funding from the local school district, the Arizona Department of Education, the Division of Developmental Disabilities and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. The funds are used to cover project expenses, to pay wages to the students, to pay for job coaches who provide continued support for students once they have been placed in competitive employment, and to pay for a van to transport the students between schools and job sites.

The Continental Country Club was chosen as the site for the program because the hospitality industry is one of the largest employers in the Flagstaff area. Through work experience at Continental, students are provided

opportunities to learn a wide range of jobs including food and beverage preparation, handling reservations for the resort, assembling a mailing of 3,000 newsletters and landscaping the grounds, food preparation in the restaurant, setting tables in the dining room, and general maintenance of the clubhouse facilities and equipment, and work in the laundry area, sorting and repairing linens for distribution to the condominiums and time share units.

The students are introduced to different types of job skills by rotating through various assignments. Students work at the job-site four hours each morning and the afternoon is spent in a classroom on the second floor of the clubhouse. Based on the requirements of the IEP, a student may be in the program for the work portion in the morning and then return to the high school in the afternoon, or the student may participate in the high school program in the morning and work at the job sites afternoons. The content of the academic material focuses on learning job-related language arts, math and other core subjects, information the students can use at various jobs. Some of the academic training includes development of independent living skills.

Students stay in the program until they acquire the skills needed to succeed in competitive employment or turn twenty two. To facilitate the transitioning process, the program includes a component for making connections with local community employers to assist the students in proceeding into competitive employment. After a student gains employment, the job coach may follow them into the employment site.

Participants

There are 22 students currently participating in the program. The current ethnic makeup of the students is 41% Native American, 28% Mexican American, 28% White, and 3% African American. Native American students derive from the Havasupai, White Mountain Apache, Navajo and Hopi tribes. The program serves students enrolled in Special Education at one of the local

high schools. Participants are eligible to participate when 16 years old, and must exit the program at their 22nd birthday. In the life of the program, 45 youth have successfully been trained and transitioned into community employment.

Purpose of the Program

The primary goal of the program is based on student development. The development of particular job skills is a secondary focus. The emphasis includes inculcating a strong work ethic and teaching fundamental personal and job skills that will give them enhanced employability. Self management and life skills are also a focus.

The special education staff includes the Project Director/Special Education Teacher and three job coaches. The attitude and working relationship of the staff is a key to the success of the Continental Project. The staff members work side by side with the students to teach them skills for each job they are assigned. Positive learning experiences occur on both sides in this project. The community workers learn to appreciate the capabilities of the students as workers and as persons. Those workers who were apprehensive because they had little or no exposure to people with specials needs are now extremely enthusiastic about the program. The students are viewed by the staff and management as making significant contributions to the operation of the business and as a critical asset.

Summary

This project is exceeding the guidelines for preparation of students for the world of work, and students are contributing significantly to the world of work during their training. The Project Director has been approached by other businesses in the community who would like to develop a similar school-industry partnership. As a result, the project may be expanding into telecommunications jobs, in the automotive sector and banking industries in the near future. This project certainly has the potential to positively impact

the lives of many students with disabilities. Transition from school to competitive employment is possible, and it is a natural next step for students and the community. As we look to the globalization of a work force and diversity in types of labor needs, we can see an increased need for positions in service related niches. In addition, a decade of inclusion has enhanced the perception of humanity for youth who were originally accorded disdain.

It is a natural next step to follow those gains with increased community participation and inclusion in community based occupations. It is not enough to legislate acceptance, we need programs that include youngsters with special needs in life pursuits that are challenging and meaningful, that reflect their humanity and gifts, for the benefit of students and the community. The Continental program illustrates community readiness for a more proactive approach to vocational inclusion.

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